



**CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES:
WORKING WITH THE MEDIA TO PRESENT THE FACTS**

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CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES: WORKING WITH THE MEDIA TO PRESENT THE FACTS

1. Controversial Issues

- a. what makes an issue a controversial one (the same thing that makes it news)
- b. life cycle of a controversial issue/where the media fit into the cycle
- c. what causes controversial issues to emerge?
- d. why do values change?
- e. examples of changes in values
- f. why is there a seeming increase in the number of controversial issues?
- g. how have activists been so successful in spurring controversial issues?

2. Environmental Scanning/Issues Management

- a. how to anticipate the development of a controversial issue
- b. environmental scanning and issues management - is it for you?
- c. knowing where the media are on an issue - the news hole approach to issues management
- d. where the media fit into the life cycle of a controversial issue

3. Promoting Positive Relationships With the News Media

- a. when should the media become involved?
- b. who should approach the media about getting involved?
- c. how should they be approached about covering a controversial issue of public concern?
- d. vehicles for involvement - the how-to's of promoting media interest and involvement
- e. keeping the news media involved and informed throughout the life cycle of a controversy

4. Anticipating Media Needs for Controversial Issue Coverage

- a. fostering good relationships through planning
- b. building openness, honesty and integrity into your relationships with the news media during a controversial issue

5. Case Studies

WHAT MAKES AN ISSUE CONTROVERSIAL?

The same thing that makes it news, or newsworthy.

What is news?

- ◆ a timely, accurate and current report of the facts surrounding an event
- ◆ judged by standard called "news value"

Components of News

1. timeliness

- ◆ something that has just happened
- ◆ timely in terms of its being seasonal in nature
- ◆ a news story is timely when a majority of readers are in need of the information- localness or proximity
- ◆ news that originates within the media's viewing or circulation area
- ◆ news from other areas if it is relevant or important to readers or viewers

2. prominence or importance

- ◆ crucial word is "big"
- ◆ what the event means to an audience, how big the event is in the community or the effects of a project
- ◆ prominence, status or standing of a particular individual

3. conflict or consequence

- ◆ struggles of people against their environment, or against one another, individually or in groups

4. progress or change

- ◆ changes brought about by humankind that are beneficial, resulting in:
- ◆ new technology
- ◆ sophisticated production methods
- ◆ modern equipment
- ◆ better living conditions
- ◆ improved human relations
- ◆ also includes detrimental changes that result in problems like:

- ♦ soil erosion
- ♦ energy wastefulness
- ♦ water and air pollution

5. unusualness

- ♦ anything out of the ordinary, rare, odd or sometimes unforeseen ideas, events or situations qualify

6. human interest

- ♦ ideas, events or situations which touch human emotions
- ♦ human interest stories arouse curiosity, incite anger, elicit fear, joy, sadness, compassion or other feelings
- ♦ people are interested in other people - especially children and senior citizens - and in animals

LIFE CYCLE OF A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE

=====> Changing Public Expectations

- ◆ creates a gap between what the organization is doing and what the public expects. It becomes a controversial issues when the gap is wide enough to affect large numbers of people, causing extensive dissatisfaction with organizational performance

=====> Politicizing the Controversial Issue

- ◆ the issue becomes widely discussed in the media, becomes a focus of interest groups, and may be picked up by politicians who may put the issue into the public policy process. It is then brought before the public by putting it on the public policy agenda

=====> Enactment and Implementation of Legislation

- ◆ the rules of the game for an organization are changed with the enactment of legislation and regulation. At this stage, the issue has become institutionalized because society has changed the contract between an organization and society, expressing its expectations through legislation and regulation

=====> Litigation

- ◆ involves implementation of the new rules of the game. There may be negotiations between society and organizations about implementation of the new rules, which may result in lawsuits to force compliance

WHAT CAUSES CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

Simply.....changes in basic values of society.

WHY DO VALUES CHANGE? (Lesly and Buchholz)

They change in response to:

1. **spreading effects of technological and scientific development.** This has expanded human awareness, contact and horizons. Includes changes in technology that make it possible to do some things that have never been done before, or to do them more cheaply
2. **new information,** which changes the way we think and feel
3. **shifts in population.** They have an effect on the major value systems we have. Urbanization and suburbanization have changed people's outlook on what life has to offer as well as the way they live. Has broadened people's expectations.
4. **education.** As we learn more, we may question what they want and the things they were raised to believe were important. Has opened hundreds of windows on the world...before, people lived in the narrow cells of their prejudices. Has also produced people who feel entitled to what seems to be promised, but find most of what they seek beyond their reach.
5. **changes in basic institutions such as family and religion**
6. **affluence, or wealth.** As people become more wealthy and their basic economic needs are met, people tend to strive for luxuries rather than necessities and to look for self-fulfillment or better quality of life.
7. **electronic communication --** has made the world truly a global village, making people instantly aware of what used to be out of their sight and hearing

EXAMPLES OF VALUE CHANGES THAT SPURRED DEVELOPMENT OF MAJOR PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES:

Civil Rights Movement

Women's Rights Movement

Consumer Movement

Ecology Movement

WHY THE SEEMING INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

1. people have been freed from the necessity of struggling to meet their basic needs, so they have the time and the inclination to be perpetual critics
2. there is a growing body of professional organizers, who approach issues not from a concern for a particular grievance, rather, in search of a cause they agitate among people
3. a group of activists in the news media who distrust a system that rewards people who deal with practical matters more than it rewards them -- and who saw journalists like Woodward and Bernstein convert this attitude into money and fame

WHY HAVE ACTIVISTS BEEN SO SUCCESSFUL IN SPURRING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

1. they can be **simplistic**. It is a basic axiom that the public can grasp a simple concept while refusing to think about anything complicated

Example: Declaring "No Pollution!" has immediate impact and appeal. Explaining why nothing that the human race needs can be produced without leaving some by-products that must be disposed of, and there's no known way to do so without leaving some effluent or creating other problems -- this is complicated and the public doesn't want to hear about it.

2. they can be **irresponsible**, while leaders of universities, institutions and other organizations are accountable to the public and cannot take irresponsible positions. An activist group can disrupt city traffic, causing loss of time and money for citizens, without penalty. They can spread misinformation or in some cases, outright lies, about an issue or institution, without repercussions. Government and universities are constrained by federal or state laws, regulations and procedures, ethics and must function through approved procedures and sometimes lengthy processes.
3. they know how to use the news media to attract attention to their cause and to help them accomplish their goals.

HOW TO ANTICIPATE DEVELOPING ISSUES

- you can pay a consulting firm like that of John Naisbitt thousands of dollars,
- you can pay a public relations firm thousands of dollars or
- you can learn how to do it yourself (the cheapest way)

WHAT TECHNIQUES CAN YOU USE TO ANTICIPATE DEVELOPMENT OF CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

- Environmental Scanning
- Issues Management

ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING

- ♦ ♦ if an issue "sneaks" up on you, you haven't been paying attention to signals around you
- ♦ ♦ environmental scanning helps you pick up those signals by monitoring sources of information - from civic club discussions to country store meetings to county commission meetings and more
- ♦ ♦ however, environmental scanning can be an expensive, time-consuming management tool because it must be done on a weekly or monthly basis
- ♦ ♦ a simpler way to do environmental scanning is to use the "news hole" method

WHAT IS THE "NEWS HOLE" METHOD?

1. look at your daily and weekly newspapers. Take a particular look at the front page of the national section (dailies) and the front page of your local news (dailies and local)
2. for any front page, there will be a maximum of ten lead articles or 10 "news holes." "News holes" are generally filled with those news stories that address the most pressing issues facing the nation, state, county or town/city. Secondary "news holes" for developing issues can be found on the pages two and three of the local, state and/or national sections
3. news media (TV, radio and newspaper) tend to be very accurate barometers of those issues that are of increasing public interest.
4. if you monitor, on a regular basis, those stories going into the "news holes" of your newspapers, you will find that a pattern will emerge. Stories that start out as a short article on an upcoming county commission meeting will spawn an informational article about an upcoming issue during the meeting. Once the meeting has occurred, another article will follow outlining local government response to the issue, and perhaps the politics of the issue. If citizens are concerned, another article may follow which outlines and elaborates on those concerns. This may be followed by a response from governmental officials to those concerns. This may be followed by letters to the editor from citizens or an editorial. Then, an in-depth research piece may follow.
5. by monitoring news holes, you can tell when an issue starts, when government, citizens and the media consider it important, and basically predict a time frame for it either becoming a major issue, stalling in the public process and going nowhere for a period of time, or dying out of the picture.

6. you can then determine what action you need to take to educate the public about the controversial issue....we'll talk more about that later

EXAMPLE OF A NEWS HOLE

The Charlotte Observer

- September 9 "Martha Hale's Beautiful Necklace: A Catawba River Treasure We Must Protect for Future Generations," Editorial Page Comment by Rich Oppel, Editor - announces conference on the future of the Catawba River Lakes, Oct. 11
- September 15 "Environmental Justice?," Letter to the Editor from citizen
- September 16 First of a three-article series entitled, "Troubled Waters."
- "Catawba Choking on Sewage: Treatment Plants Gush Pollution," by David Perlmutter and Ann Doss Helms
- "Violations Pile Up; Punishment Lags," by Laura Zelenko
- "Unappealing, Not Illegal: Bacteria, Pollutants Found in Tests of Creek Water," by David Perlmutter
- "City Plants Rife With Problems," by Ann Doss Helms and Laura Zelenko
- Editorial: "Water Pollution: So What?: If Enforcers Aren't Concerned, Why Should Violators Be?"
- September 17 Second of three article series called, "Troubled Waters" on the Catawba River Lakes.
- "Lapses By Private Operators Common: Small Sewage Plants on Honor System, So Punishment Rare," by David Perlmutter and Shirley Hunter Moore
- "Regional Plant Could Bail Out Strained System," by David Perlmutter and Laura Zelenko
- "Water Watch Pleased With Role," Letter to the Editor
- "Catawba Offers A Lot," Letter to the Editor
- September 18 Third of three-article series called, "Troubled Waters" on the Catawba River Lakes
- "Industry's Chemicals Enter Catawba Unchecked, by Ann Doss Helms
- "We Want to Run A Clean Facility: Hickory Firm Upgrades Treatment Plant - Racking Up Violations All the While," by Shirley Hunter Moore
- "Take A Swig of the River: There Aren't Many Limits on the Chemicals You're Drinking," by Laura Zelenko
- Special Editorial Article, "Protect Our Drinking Water: Ban or Limit Development of Mountain Island Lake," by Barbara Webster, president of the Earth Coalition

WHERE DO THE MEDIA FIT INTO THE LIFE CYCLE OF AN ISSUE AND WHEN SHOULD YOU GET THEM INVOLVED?

- ♦ ♦ in short, from the very first
- ♦ ♦ when you perceive that an issue will develop into one of public interest, you need to start educating the news media about it
- ♦ ♦ how do you educate the news media before an issue becomes a public one?
 1. don't always be the "lone ranger" in trying to educate the news media. Sometimes you can be most effective by staying in the background, educating influential or prominent citizens who have a balanced outlook, and letting them tackle to the job of educating the media. These people are sometimes seen as having less of a personal interest than you because you represent an organization, while they are citizens looking out for the good of the community.
 2. if an upcoming issue looks as if it will become a controversial one, one way to get assistance in educating the public and the news media about it is to **form a public information/education committee** to help put an educational plan together. Include citizens, influential leaders, businesspeople and news media management. In other words, get your newspaper publisher or your radio station manager involved. In larger cities, this might mean public affairs directors for radio or TV, or newspaper publisher. This will help ensure a media-oriented outlook and some interest in coverage. It also helps ensure more balanced coverage in most instances since the media manager has a stake in a positive outcome. Don't ask reporters to be on these committees -- it would be a conflict of interest for them and you want people who have power and influence in the community....managers have it, reporters don't.
 3. **balanced, fact-based factsheets on the issue.** They may not be immediately used, but the media will have them when they need them.
 4. **formal or informal conversations with reporters** you deal with, or with the editors or publishers, particularly if you know them. You may want to request an opportunity to visit with a local paper staff during their staff meeting time to brief them on upcoming or current issues, giving them the most recent information from NCSU in that area, or talking about other counties' experiences.
 5. if you live in a larger metropolitan area, you may want to **request a visit with the editorial board of your daily newspaper**, not to tell them how they ought to position articles, but to give them factual information on the issue. Make presentations brief, with no editorial or emotion-based comments, and have a brief factsheet or information packet with contact people listed that you can leave with them.
 6. **offer a news media tour, or offer them the names of people involved** who would be willing to talk to them if demonstrations or activities going on in the county can shed light on an issue. For example, if the concern is over animal waste management and you have demonstrations and/or farmers who are dealing with solid waste in an effective and environmentally-sensitive manner, the media may not know about it, so tell them.

7. **don't think only male or only female reporters are the only ones who need education about certain issues. Don't preach to the converted -- if you are educating the media about animal waste management, don't look only to male reporters or ag reporters friendly to the cause already.**
8. **use weekly columns you write for local newspapers as an opportunity to educate, or ask your local editor if you can submit a special article for the paper, or a series**
9. **talk with local radio stations about public affairs programming.** Ask if you can be a guest or bring in experts in the area to talk about the issue. That 15-to-30 minute spot can do a good job educating some segments of the population
10. **in some instances, you may even get a local station to do some live coverage of an educational meeting or public hearing**
11. **ask the news media what they need, and supply it.** Give them a list of contacts and phone numbers so when they get ready to develop an article, they know where to go
12. **if extension publications already exist that can help educate a news media person about an issue, use them.** Don't, however, inundate them; pick the publication that will do the best job for you
13. **ask a specialist or specialists to come to your county,** involve key citizens or advisory committee members, sponsor a coffee hour and invite the news media or news media management to it. Make sure the event is focused, presents both sides of the issue, short and to-the-point. To open the event, make a statement of the issue as it is perceived, extension's impartial role in education about the issue, let these citizens voice their concerns about the issue and introduce the specialist for a short presentation. Then, allow them to ask questions and again, offer short, written information and a list of contacts and phone numbers.
14. **target specific audiences you want to reach and look for media outlets or other methods of communications that will reach them**
15. **have an informational meeting on an issue with your county commissioners or other officials, and invite the media.** Attendance is ensured in most cases.
16. **be available.** Nothing is worse than cultivating a news media person, telling them that you're there to assist them and when the crunch is on...you're not around. **Develop a policy among the people who answer your phones that:**
 - a. **not only do they take a name and phone number, but they try to find out if the person looking for you is a reporter.**
 - b. **If so, then they need to find out a little bit about what the reporter wants from you,** if the reporter is willing to tell them. They also need to ask the reporter if he/she needs the information quickly due to a deadline.
 - c. **the phone answerer needs to tell them an approximate time you will return, or will be able to return their phone call.** If you are not back

by that time, the person responsible for your phone messages needs to call back and tell the reporter he/she has not been forgotten, but you have been delayed and will get in touch with them by a certain time the next day.

- d. you need to always tell your people where you're going to be and how they can get up with you. If it is a media emergency or the reporter is on a tight deadline, and only you can answer the questions, you need to work to be available.
- e. if you're going to be out in the field and not reachable by phone, then you need to make arrangements to call in at least once every four hours for messages.
- f. again, if you're going to a meeting or on vacation, and you're the only one with the answers, then you need to leave phone numbers where you can be reached, or brief someone in your office on the subject so they can answer questions. There is no excuse for leaving the media high and dry on a controversial issue while you go fishing.
- g. don't get irate if a news media person calls you at home. They're doing their job, and if they couldn't find you during the day, or their editor has a last-minute question, they may have to call you at home. Whether we like it or not, public servants don't have a 9-to-5 job.

WHAT DO YOU DO IF AND WHEN A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE EXPLODES?

1. **no media relations plan and an antiagonistic view of the news media will lead to disaster**
2. **get bad news out quickly; the quicker it gets out, the quicker it becomes old news**
3. **a well-fed press is a happy press. If they are not fed, they will hunt you down and get the story, whether from you or someone else. Tell them who, what, when, where and why and they will go away (Tom Ditt, Emergency Management)**
4. **when a controversial issue breaks, the news media know they will be viewed as an unwanted and distrusted burden, so they will be looking for the path of least resistance in covering the issue**
 - ♦ **that means if you are helpful and honest, they'll come to you first. If you are a roadblock, they'll find a way to work around you**
5. **most news media are intelligent, well-educated and underpaid. By nature, they are inquisitive, suspicious and skeptical. By training, they are independent thinkers who look at all facets of a situation, good and bad.**
 - ♦ **during the time they cover a controversial issue, they are subject to long hours of work, crushing deadlines, and a lack of understanding from and communication with the editors and news directors that make the assignments, then make the final decision on how a story is played. Bureaucracy, politics and breakdowns in communications are found in the news media as well as in Extension.**
6. **don't expect to satisfy news media during this time with fluff. They will come to you expecting to hear only half the truth and also expecting that you want them to portray Extension only in the best light. If you meet this expectation, you are dead in the water with the news media.**

♦ ♦ SO, HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH THE MEDIA DURING A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE?

1. **with honesty. The biggest problem the news media have with organizations during coverage of a controversial issue is lying, or lying by omission.**
 - ♦ **it never hurts to admit you were wrong or in error if you were. This will do more for your credibility, and make negative coverage of the issue shorter in duration and more balanced.**
 - ♦ **if you get involved with a controversial issue knowing that you cannot present balanced, impartial fact-based information, then do yourself and Extension a favor and don't get involved at all. You will probably do more harm than good.**
 - ♦ **if you get involved with a controversial issue knowing that you may have to cave into political pressure to present a certain set of facts or conceal information, you're better off not getting involved.**
2. **you cannot control the news, but you can guide it by being proactive and first out with information**

3. **don't show favoritism** to one news media outlet over another. You'll be the big loser. If you have information to give to news media, either give it to them all at once or not at all. The only exception is if a media outlet gets the jump on everyone else and asks for the information well in advance of release. Then, they deserve a jump on the story -- say, release to them the day before the rest of the media receive it.
4. if the issue is one that attracts national media coverage as well as local media coverage, **the temptation is to bend over backwards for the national media and let the locals fend for themselves. Don't do it.** The local media will still be there covering the issue and working with you long after the nationals leave. Make sure the local media have what they need -- the national media will pick up information from local coverage; it does not work the other way generally.
5. **a major gripe of news media is not returning calls or responding with requested information before the reporter's deadline.** You shoot your credibility, and reporters will work around you whenever possible. The other source that reporter finds may have erroneous or slanted information that can cause you real problems.
6. most reporters are looking for quick answer and solutions during a controversial issue. They are not going to want all of the technical details of the issue, and they aren't going to take time to learn the chronology of all of the events that led up to it. You must **put together information for them that gives them the essential information they need to understand and write about it in a balanced manner.**
7. **pack journalism can be a problem.** Pack journalism is when reporters from different media outlets are determined not to let another reporter get the jump on them. This attitude affects reporters' news judgement, sensitivity, taste, and accuracy of reporters and their news organizations in covering stories. The pack journalism phenomenon breeds instant investigative reporters who will focus on anything that seems to have a tinge of controversy and blow it out of proportion.
8. **news media will stick with a source of information as long as it will provide them with information, interviews and visuals they need to carry out their assignment to the satisfaction of their superiors.**
9. we all tend to get defensive when we hear critical comments, allegations and innuendos made by reporters who editorialize during their reporting. We would **all be better off accepting that that is the nature of the news business and there is nothing we can do about it.** Reporters get tired, frustrated and jerked around trying to cover a story, and when that happens, it influences their attitudes. Coverage will turn negative if they run into:
 - ◆ a continually unfolding number of negative disclosures that leak out because we don't want to admit them, or we think if we ignore them the media will never find out.
 - ◆ reporting roadblocks. If the information exists, reporters know it exists and they can't get hold of it, the coverage will start to go negative.
 - ◆ errors, omissions and outright lies. During a controversial issue, be certain

all information is accurate before you disclose it. If a media outlet uses erroneous information and its hand is called, you can bet you won't be looked on in favor. Omitting key facts or releasing inaccurate statements is also heading for trouble. You can hang it up if you ever resort to lies and get caught. The news media will chew you up, and spit you out.

- ♦ lack of hard news. If, during the life of a controversial issue, there is no more information of substance to impart, you're better off telling the media so than trying to keep a flow of communications going with fluff material.
- ♦ double standards in dealing with the press. Don't play favorites.
- ♦ stalling and stonewalling. Don't try to shut off a story by refusing to provide information or responding to the reporter.

9. **if being interviewed on TV, remember TV is an emotional, not intellectual medium. People will remember your style, how you looked, behaved and the quality of your voice.**

- ♦ take off your sunglasses
- ♦ don't be glib or try to add a light touch when talking about a serious subject
- ♦ avoid jargon and confusing terms
- ♦ be clear and to the point; if you can't say it within 20-30 seconds, it's going to be edited and may not say what you want it to say. In 1968, the average TV sound bite was 45 seconds; in 1988, it was 7.8 seconds -- compress your message
- ♦ draft your message around a short quote that you hope to see that night on TV
- ♦ Queue up you sound bites with a, "and the most important thing about this issue is"...pause so they can edit the first part of the sentence out
- ♦ don't let ambush interviews happen, grant interviews to media people
- ♦ don't commit slow-motion suicide; get it out
- ♦ talk about people, not programs. Tell people how they will benefit
- ♦ don't make it worse than it is, but don't make it better either
- ♦ say it and shut up
- ♦ prepare; don't try to wing it

HOW TO RESPOND WITHOUT OVERREACTING

1. **have defenses in place.** The first contact about a controversial issue will most likely come by phone. Be sure the secretaries know where to route news media calls. Have people answering the phones who know what they can say and how far they can go in responding to media questions. It's also important for your staff to be kept abreast of any new developments and how they should be handled.

2. when you get questions with negative overtones from the news media, the first inclination is to become defensive. It is better to:
 - ♦ **find out what the reporter's questions are and some sense of his rationale in asking them**
 - ♦ **ask if he has considered points that he did not mention, and what the pros and cons of the situation are**
 - ♦ **never give a "no comment," find someone to go on the record with the reporter.**
 - ♦ **suggest people he should talk to. It won't always prevent a bad story, but it can make a bad story better.**
 - ♦ **don't lose patience and get indignant if a reporter starts asking probing questions about a sensitive area. All that does is signal the reporter that that is an area in which you are vulnerable, and he needs to do more digging. But, protect yourself by:**
 - ♦ **asking the reporter who requests an on-air, or on-the-record interview to give you the questions he wants to ask in advance.**
 - ♦ **you need to decide how to give a proper polite response to questions that may be asked that you cannot answer or don't have the authority to answer**
 - ♦ **if a tough question is asked, take time to frame your response carefully and be sure you can back up whatever you say.**
 - ♦ **regardless of the line of questioning, be pleasant, relaxed, sincere, confident, and maintain good eye contact and body language.**
 - ♦ **don't be evasive or combative. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Otherwise, you will appear to be guilty even if you aren't.**
 - ♦ **don't give confused or contradictory answers. Take time to frame what you say very carefully.**
3. **don't be a wishful thinker. Don't look for something positive or hopeful to make a bad story better. You will get beaten over the head with it. Don't use words like "never," when you should be saying "that I am aware of" or "to the best of my knowledge."**
4. **beware of wolves in sheep's clothing. A reporter may request an interview for one purpose, when they actually have another. If there is an area of information that you cannot, due to lack of information, or will not, due to instructions from superiors, discuss, you need to develop a mantra statement that can be repeated over and over again with a smile. Beware of the "silence" technique that media use.**
5. **if you screw up, admit it. Correct or clarify erroneous or misleading information. Don't speculate.**
6. **after the initial flurry of news coverage occurs, don't forget the media. They still**

need factual information throughout the life of a controversial issue.

HOW SHOULD YOU TREAT THE MEDIA THROUGHOUT THE LIFE OF A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE?

1. **keep them updated.** When you know something, they should know it.
2. **use short media notes, additional factsheet information, short news releases to keep them informed.** Don't use a media conference unless it is a major event in the life of an issue
3. **keep lines of communication open.** Just call periodically to ask if they need anything -- information, contacts, resources, etc.
4. **don't call them only when you need them.** Make sure they have what they need.
5. **don't ask for the media's help only when the news is good and ignore them when it's bad...** pretty soon, your credibility will be shot and they won't be willing to work with you in any way -- they'll work around you

DEALING WITH DISRUPTIONS

Listed below are some considerations for dealing with disruptions in the here-and-now, as well as improving future handling of them.

- ◆ Don't get angry and defensive, and stay calm, regardless of the provocation. All you do is make yourself a target, lose control and increase the perception that disruptors have credibility and power. Learn to disassociate yourself from issues so you can deal with disruptors logically. View disruptors as attacking what you represent, not you personally.

- ◆ Watch body language and facial expressions. It doesn't help to remain calm and cool if your body language and facial expressions shout defensiveness and hatred.

- ◆ Remember, you need to educate groups while dispassionately defending what you consider to be "the right position." You do no one any good by playing the emotional, angry defender of the "true, just cause" with disruptors.

- ◆ Don't bully; practice really listening to demands. People are so certain that other groups just "go through the motions," they are often surprised when someone really takes time to listen to their concerns, clarify them and concede that while some should be pursued further, still others should not. Work at finding something legitimate among their demands; having a small amount of legitimacy given to at least one or two of their demands will sometimes be all that is needed. Practice "inclusive" politics.

- ◆ Ignore the rhetoric that goes along with groups positioning themselves in an issue. What they term a "victory" may have been "minor concessions" to you, but you're not aiming for a win-lose situation. You're aiming for coming to a mutually acceptable collaboration, or failing that, compromise.

- ◆ Know your stuff. If you know what you're talking about, then you don't have to fumble around for responses to pointed questions or become defensive. Your knowledge should be great enough that you don't need notes.

- ◆ Don't put yourself in the position of handling an event or meeting where disruptions might occur if you can't handle or dislike dealing with confrontations. Let someone else chair it.

- ◆ You can prevent disruptions by announcing the rules of the game before a meeting starts. Be fair to everyone. Take a timer and tell everyone up front that they will all have a chance to speak, but everyone will be limited to a specific amount of time. Also, if the meeting is large, have everyone sign up to speak. Ask people who plan to speak to listen to speakers before them and not repeat remarks that have already been made. Ask everyone to follow the basic rule of courtesy for each speaker.

- ◆ Don't have disruptors jailed unless they pose a physical threat. If you jail them, you focus attention on their power and solidify their support.

- ◆ Don't make promises that you can't keep. Many times, people become disruptors because false promises were made to address their concerns.

- ◆ Work at making every situation a win-win one. No one ever gets everything their way. If you can collaborate or compromise with disruptors and still achieve your major goals, do it.

- ◆ Use your intuition or "gut feeling" to ferret out who among the disruptors is reasonable and willing to compromise. Then, involve them in your group and listen to what they have to say. You'll find they can make large contributions to resolution of major differences between your group and that of the disruptors.